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Federico Fellini: An Interview

The roar of a powerful car stops me after I have taken only a few steps from the old building where the director of *La Dolce Vita* has his office. The repeated blowing of a horn makes me turn around in curiosity. An arm waves frantically from the window of a luxurious Jaguar 3-4 and, as the car door opens, I see that the arm belongs to the tall and rather stocky Fellini. Fellini is often referred to by Italians as the "Maestro." A typically charming Italian, and a clever actor, he comes toward me smiling and shakes my hand with such warmth that no one can hold a grudge for his delay.

"Shall we go for a coffee, or shall we talk in the car?" he asks, patting my shoulder. The question is simply a formality, since the "Maestro" has his plan already designed. He will drive me around town and then take me to the new, towering buildings of the Universal Exposition some ten miles out of Rome, where the set for his current film has been built.

It is an unusual experience to be chauffeured through the Eternal City by the director of *La Strada*, *Cabiria*, and *La Dolce Vita*, which in New York, the news runs, is sold out for a year in advance. Fellini seems to be very much at ease in conversation while driving in the confused and risky Roman traffic. Sitting beside him, I can observe his every facial expression without being noticed. He talks much with his free hand, alternating the left with the right on the wheel. From time to time his sharp brown eyes meet mine when he is trying to bring out a particular point and his intense face might have just emerged from a Michelangelo fresco. Once assured that his driving skill is perfectly compatible with his well-

known conversational fluency, I begin asking questions.

"Maestro, what would you say is the relationship, if any, between Italian neorealist movie-making and your personal art?"

"First of all," Fellini answers, "we must agree on the meaning of neorealism. The neorealistic experience intended to portray a certain social reality; it had a political meaning, more than an aesthetic one, and this engendered some confusion. In good or bad faith, because of stupidity or simply interest, certain political parties tried to take advantage of this new form of picture-making which appeared in Italy after the war. I would say that neorealism had little to do with art-qu-a-art; except for one director, Rossellini, who invented his own way of making movies. But, you see, we cannot really even say that there was a school. Even De Sica, he is more than anything else a delicate executor of stories. And Visconti is the product of a more refined and decadent trend. His *La Terra Trema* has nothing to do with the powerful realism of Rossellini. I don't believe in schools; I believe in artists who, if they are great, will open new roads and, thereby, create imitators. One thing is true: Italy, during Fascism, was a closed country, a nation that was imprisoned in absolute falsity. The horrid Fascist lie made us believe for twenty years that we were the most beautiful and perfect people in the world. When the dictatorship was overthrown, we discovered our own country. That is why the war, even if horrible in itself, was a benediction on the human level, as far as we are concerned. We could look freely around us now, and the reality appeared so extraordinary that we

couldn't resist watching it and photographing it with astonished and virgin eyes. This is why Rossellini could move the entire world. However, this was the first stage. Whoever would go to the moon now, and bring us the first pictures of it, would also cause a great commotion around him. But after a while, we wouldn't be satisfied to have photos and reports only. We would want to send a poet there, the artist who would give us a new vision of that new reality."

"And this artist, this poet, is it you?" I ask bluntly.

"Well, I didn't mean that," Fellini replies in a serious tone.

At this point a bus almost runs over us from the left, but Fellini calmly wheels away and goes on talking. "The really important contribution of neorealism is that it suggested a way to look at things — not with the narcissistic glasses of the author, but with equilibrium between reality and subjectivism."

"Shall we conclude therefore that neorealism is dead?"

"It is dead today as a movement which bore the stamp of social reality as an exclusive object of interest. Today the interest is drawn to man himself—his metaphysical, psychological, and total structure."

"Of this man as the object of modern cinematographic art, it seems that you prefer to stress his situation of loneliness in the midst of today's world, in *La Strada* as well as *La Dolce Vita*?"

"Yes. More exactly *La Dolce Vita* is the private and confidential confession of a man who speaks of himself and his aberration. It is as if a friend were telling to other friends his confusion, his contradictions, and his deceptions, trying to clarify for himself his own sentimental aridity. Marcello, the hero of *La Dolce Vita*, is from this point of view very similar to Zampano, the hero of *La Strada*, although the first is more cultured, and more guilty because he is more intelligent."

"What other directors, if any, do you think have influenced your style and inspiration?"



"Without being conceited, I must say that I don't recognize anyone as my father in art. There have been, of course, some fortunate meetings, as with Rossellini, but nothing more. My only master has been life, since I believe that cinema must derive from life, and not vice versa. I feel a solidarity of intentions with some other directors, but not a solidarity of expression."

"Could you describe an evolution of themes and style from your early movies up to date?"

"Evolution? I would rather say it is a journey progressing along the same road. There is no real difference between the inspirational motives of *The White Sheik* and *La Dolce Vita*. The difference is only exterior. There is the same meditation, the same look—surprised, astonished, ironic."

"Speaking of *La Dolce Vita*, many critics have said that you wanted to depict some aspects of real life in Rome; others have spoken of symbolism as, for instance, with regard to the last scene showing the monstrous fish. Did you want to call to mind a well-known front-page story of a woman who was found dead on the Roman beach, presumably after an orgy?"

"*La Dolce Vita* is a pure fruit of imagination," answers Fellini in a tone which doesn't sound totally convincing. He immediately adds: "There may be, of course, a coincidence between the episodes of the movie and some episodes of reality. You see, in the film there are some scenes involving aristocrats; but I've never been associated with titled people in my life. As to the monster at the end of the movie, it is for me a remembrance of my childhood. I was walking along the sea of Rimini in the early morning when I saw that the sea had vomited a monstrous fish. Images of this kind find their right place in a movie, if properly sowed in the context with the skill of acquired experience." (Yet Fellini doesn't deny completely the symbolic meaning of many of the scenes in his last movie whose end, he says, is one of "folly and hope.")

"The last scene in *La Dolce Vita* doesn't seem to be what is called a 'happy ending.' It

is true that the young girl smiles at the hero, but her smile is enigmatic and Marcello goes his own way. Do you purposely keep away from happy endings?"

"I think it would be immoral to present a ready-made solution at the end of a movie. Such a solution would necessarily be forced and, therefore, false." Then, as if talking to himself, Fellini adds: "I haven't found a final solution myself and I would consider myself finished if I had found it. I don't have any certainty or clarity myself; it would be dishonest to give it to the characters of my movies. It is more honest to leave in the viewer a torment that can engender meditation, instead of offering an euphoric solution at any price."

We drive along the avenue that leads to the Vatican; soon we approach the columned square of Saint Peter's. I remember that Fellini is considered by many as a Catholic artist (he is known to be the friend of bishops and cardinals), yet there are others who call him a Latin existentialist. His attitude of spiritual torment may justify the latter definition. His position may even recall Plato's "skepsi" (in the etymological meaning of a continual search), but cannot be interpreted as skepticism.

"I have faith in humanity," the Master goes on. "All of us are children somehow."

Now our conversation turns to his current movie. It is a twenty-minute episode titled "The Temptations of Dr. Antonio" and is designed to be a part of a sort of anthology with the title *Boccaccio '70*. (Boccaccio was an Italian writer of the fourteenth century, well known for the spicy content of his short stories in the *Decameron*.) The other episodes will be directed by Rossellini, Antonioni, De Sica, Monicelli, and Visconti. Fellini's episode tells the story of a serious doctor who becomes obsessed by the billboard image of a girl (Anita Ekberg) who, lying lasciviously on a couch, offers the passerby a glass of milk.

"*Boccaccio '70* is a joke," says Fellini. "I accepted this competitive coöperation because the title is a challenge to censorship. All of us are fighting censorship because it is just a politi-

cal weapon. No one has the right to elect himself as a tutor of others, in art. There are still attempts to restrict individual freedom in art, but [and here Fellini speaks with an almost prophetic accent] these are the last attempts to impede the birth of modern man. There may be some martyrs in this battle, but I feel that we are at the end of the night, even if dawn is still a little far."

"Is it true that you are a friend of a cardinal who helped you out of censorship troubles concerning *Cabiria* and *La Dolce Vita*?"

Fellini smiles at this blunt question. "What is wrong in being the friend of a cardinal?" he answers, trying to evade. Then he adds: "I didn't have much trouble with *La Dolce Vita*, except after the movie had been shown. The Americans are seeing the movie in the almost uncut version, except for the two scenes that were cut in the English version; this same print was sent to the United States."

We have now arrived at the set and, as soon as they spot the Master, assistants and technicians rush to greet him and crowd around him murmuring respectfully, "Buon giorno, Maestro. . . ." It is a welcoming scene that resembles a mystic and spectacular ceremonial. Fellini walks solemnly, patting shoulders here and there, almost paternally. Later he will tell us that he is well aware that such ceremony may amuse someone who is accustomed to the somewhat different atmosphere of the Hollywood studios "but," he says, "here we still maintain the atmosphere of the craftsman and his disciples. It may be a leftover of the Middle Ages, but it is colorful and useful for the close coöperation necessary in producing a work of art." At this point I leave him, after accepting his invitation to return the following day. "We'll have lunch together in the interval between shooting. . . ."

The following day I arrive at the set in time to witness Fellini's directing style. It is easy to see that he is a perfectionist. He stays behind the camera only long enough to check the shot he wants, then he leaves it entirely up to the cameraman and carefully watches the perform-

ance. He calls eight takes on a short scene in which a young widow has to cry beside a coffin. By the eighth take the girl is really crying. The 20-minute episode for *Boccaccio '70* has taken more than a month in rehearsals and shooting. He justifies this length by saying that at the present point of his career he can not allow himself to be less than perfect.

It is more than rare to see the Maestro ever lose his temper. He sometimes becomes excited when he talks, but during the shooting he is absolutely calm and friendly with the actors and the crew—encouraging and, at times, almost tender. Always carefully dressed, he takes his jacket off only if it is really hot or if he has to show an actress how to move her hips. (Even this job he does very effectively.)

At lunch in a modern restaurant called "Old America" we also meet Mrs. Fellini, actress Magali Noël, and actor Peppino De Filippo. Mrs. Fellini is better known as Giulietta Masina, the gifted heroine of *La Strada* and *Cabiria*. Fellini informs me that she will star again in his next movie. "What will be the subject of your next movie?" Fellini answers that he has promised himself not to talk about it until the time comes. But a few moments later he decides to reveal the general story idea. "It will be an attempt to study what the little girl says with her enigmatic smile to Marcello at the end of *La Dolce Vita*."

"Would you like to make a movie in the United States?"

"Flattering offers have come to me from America, and I was recently in New York for two months attempting to find inspiration for story ideas. I even found some. One, for instance, on American women, but I decided not to do anything about it. Directing is a work of youth in the sense that it requires spirit of adventure, as it would mean for me to go to discover America. . . ."

"But, Maestro, I thought you felt young. . . ."

Fellini smiles. "Yes, maybe the real reason is something else. I can't talk of things unless I feel I know them in detail. I think that an artist is like a tree. It can grow only where it has its roots. . . ."